Why projects fail: Initiation missteps

You have been learning the necessary planning steps to take in order to set a project up for success. But despite your best efforts, projects can still fail. Sometimes the factors that lead to project failure are out of your control. The technology to complete the project is unavailable, for example, or a stakeholder decides to drastically change the goals of the project. However, there are factors that can lead to failure that are more in your control, such as being unable to complete the project deliverables within the agreed upon time or being unable to fulfill the stakeholder's vision for the project.

In this reading, we will explore a few key reasons why projects fail and examine how missteps during the initiation phase can lead to project failure.

Unclear expectations

You may remember the questions you need to answer at the start of the initiation phase of the project, including:

- What is the end goal?
- What are the expected deliverables and schedule?
- What is the budget?
- Who are the stakeholders?

Not taking the time at the beginning of a project to ask essential questions, document decisions, and understand the true scope of the project may lead to failure. After all, without directions, you can never reach your destination.

Unrealistic expectations

We all like to impress our managers, but sometimes, we accidentally agree to unrealistic expectations and set our projects up for failure from the start. For example, if a project is expected to take two weeks due to the level of detail and effort required but we try to complete it in one week, we will not have the resources available to meet the consolidated schedule. This will likely result in quality issues. It's important to understand the requirements of a project before agreeing to any deadlines. As a best practice, don't commit to firm dates when initiating the project to avoid setting unrealistic expectations. You will have more information and will be able to better manage expectations in the planning phase.

Miscommunication

Clear communication is key. If information is not communicated in a timely manner, does not include pertinent information (risks, decisions made, scope changes, etc.), or is not sent to the correct stakeholders, then you may be setting yourself up for failure. Conducting a stakeholder analysis and then utilizing a RACI chart to understand which stakeholders should be kept informed or consulted is a great start to creating an effective communication strategy.

As a project manager, you do not necessarily have to cater to everyone's unique communication styles, but you do have to set expectations about how communication will occur. As you are kicking off a project, make sure you take some time to understand the communication needs of your team and stakeholders. Some people dislike emails and would prefer to have a phone conversation, some prefer to have communication in writing, and some prefer face-to-face meetings. A strong communication system incorporates all of these methods. Set expectations for your communication approach early so that you, your team members, and your stakeholders have a clear understanding of how you will all communicate.

Lack of resources

Resources include your team members, budget, and materials. Unfortunately, without proper planning, your resources can quickly be over-tasked or depleted. Sometimes project managers don't account for the fact that team members are juggling multiple tasks and may not be able to devote the time necessary to complete all of their assigned tasks correctly and on time. Or, project managers may not realize that a specific skill set is required to complete certain tasks. Ensuring that the right team members are available at the right time is crucial.

Another common error is to incorrectly calculate your project expenses. For example, imagine you have a project budget of $10,000. If your project requires $10,000 for materials and you also have to ship and install those materials, then you will not have enough money to complete your project. Clarify your resource needs and confirm their availability with leadership up front to avoid delays or issues further along in the project.

Scope creep

The scope provides an overarching framework of what is and is not included in the project's work and deliverables. Defining the scope in the initiation phase helps identify the resources needed, the cost associated with those resources, and the schedule required to complete the work. Sometimes projects fail because the scope of the project grows and impacts to the scope are not captured.

For example, imagine that you are given a project that originally includes three deliverables. During the course of the project, a stakeholder requests that two additional deliverables be included, but no changes are made to the schedule, budget, or team members to reflect the impact of the increased number of deliverables. As a project manager, when deliverables change, you have to make sure that you are capturing the potential impact of those changes to the schedule, budget, and quality. This is why it is so important to make sure that everything is documented in the initiation phase. Have a plan for how to handle scope creep if it occurs, and clarify who has the authority to approve scope changes.

Key takeaway

Taking the time to clarify expectations—particularly around communication methods, resources available, and scope—during the initiation phase will increase the chances of your project's success. Even if you follow these best practices, you may still encounter failure. Remember that in every failure, there is the opportunity to learn, grow, and do better the next time.

For additional reading on lessons that can be learned from projects that have failed, check out this article:

Seven Lessons to Learn from a Failed Project ↗